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The Return of SHERLOCK HOLMES

By A. CONAN DOYLE.

Author of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," "The Hound of the Baskervilles," "The Sign of the Four," "A Study in Scarlet," Etc.



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The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist

No. 4 of the Series

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FROM the years 1894 to 1901, inclusive, Mr. Sherlock Holmes was a very busy man. It is safe to say that there was no public case of any difficulty in which he was not consulted during those eight years, and there were hundreds of private cases, some of them of the most intricate and extraordinary character, in which he played a prominent part. As I have preserved very full notes of all these cases and was myself personally engaged in many of them, it may be imagined that it is no easy task to know which I should select to lay before the public. I shall, however, preserve my former rule and give the preference to those cases which derive their interest not so much from the brutality of the crime as from the ingenuity and dramatic quality of the solution. For this reason I will now lay before the reader the facts connected with Miss Violet Smith, the solitary cyclist of Charlington, and the curious sequel of our investigation, which culminated in unexpected tragedy.

On referring to my notebook for the year 1895 I find that it was upon Saturday, the 23rd of April, that we first heard of Miss Violet Smith. Her visit was, I remember, extremely unwelcome to Holmes, for he was immersed at the moment in a very abstruse and complicated problem concerning the peculiar persecution to which John Vincent Hardon, the well known tobacco millionaire, had been subjected. My friend, who loved above all things precision and concentration of thought, resented anything which distracted his attention from the matter in hand. And yet, without a harshness which was foreign to his nature, it was impossible to refuse to listen to the story of the young and beautiful woman, tall, graceful and queenly, who presented herself at Baker street late in the evening and implored his assistance and advice. It was vain to urge that his time was already fully occupied, for the young lady had come with the determination to tell her story, and it was evident that nothing short of force could get her out of the room until she had done so. With a resigned air and a somewhat weary smile, Holmes begged the beautiful intruder to take a seat and to inform us what it was that was troubling her.

"At least it cannot be your health," said he as his keen eyes darted over her. "So ardent a bicyclist must be full of energy."

She glanced down in surprise at her own feet, and I observed the slight roughening of the sole of the sole caused by the friction of the edge of the pedal.

"Yes, I bicycle a good deal, Mr. Holmes, and that has something to do with my visit to you today."

My friend took the lady's ungloved hand and examined it with as close an attention and as little sentiment as a scientist would show to a specimen.

"You will excuse me, I am sure. It is my business," said he as he dropped it. "I nearly fell into the error of supposing that you were typewriting. Of course it is obvious that it is music. You observe the spatulate finger ends, Watson, which is common to both professions. There is a spirituality about the face, however"—she gently turned it toward the light—"which the typewriter does not generate. This lady is a musician."

"Yes, Mr. Holmes, I teach music."

"In the country, I presume, from your complexion."

"Yes, sir; near Farnham, on the borders of Surrey."

"Now, Miss Violet, what has happened to you near Farnham, on the borders of Surrey?"

The young lady, with great clearness and composure, made the following curious statement:

"My father is dead, Mr. Holmes. He was James Smith, who conducted the orchestra at the old Imperial theater. My mother and I were left without a relation in the world except one uncle, Ralph Smith, who went to Africa twenty-five years ago, and we have never had a word from him since. When father died we were left very poor, but one day we were told that there was an advertisement in the Times inquiring for our whereabouts. You can imagine how excited we were, for we thought that some one had left a fortune. We went at once to the lawyer whose name was given in the paper. There we met two gentlemen, Mr. Carruthers and Mr. Woodley, who were home on a visit from South Africa. They said that my uncle was a friend of theirs, that he had died some months before in great poverty in Johannesburg, and that he had asked them with his last breath to hunt up his relations and see that they were in no want. It seemed strange to us that Uncle Ralph, who took no notice of us

when he was alive, should be so careful to look after us when he was dead, but Mr. Carruthers explained that the reason was that my uncle had just heard of the death of his brother and so felt responsible for our fate."

"Excuse me," said Holmes. "When was this interview?"

"Last December—four months ago."

"Pray proceed."

"Mr. Woodley seemed to me to be a most odious person. He was forever making eyes at me—a coarse, puffy faced, red mustached young man, with his hair plastered down on each side of his forehead. I thought that he was perfectly hateful, and I was sure that Cyril would not wish me to know such a person."

"Oh, Cyril is his name?" said Holmes, smiling.

The young lady blushed and laughed. "Yes, Mr. Holmes, Cyril Morton, an electrical engineer, and we hope to be married at the end of the summer. Dear me, how did I get talking about him? What I wished to say was that Mr. Woodley was perfectly odious, but that Mr. Carruthers, who was a much older man, was more agreeable. He was a dark, shrewd, clean shaven, alert person, but he had polite manners and a pleasant smile. He inquired how we were left, and on finding that we were very poor he suggested that I should come and teach music to his only daughter, aged ten. I said that I did not like to leave my mother, on which he suggested that I should go home to her every week end, and he offered me a hundred a year, which was certainly splendid pay. So it ended by my accepting, and I went down to Chiltern Grange, about six miles from Farnham. Mr. Carruthers was a widower, but he had engaged a lady housekeeper, a very respectable, elderly person, called Mrs. Dixon, to look after his establishment. The child was a dear, and everything promised well. Mr. Carruthers was very kind and very musical, and we had most pleasant evenings together. Every week end I went home to my mother in town."

"The first flaw in my happiness was the arrival of the red mustached Mr. Woodley. He came for a visit of a week, and, oh, it seemed three months to me. He was a dreadful person—a bully to every one else, but to me, something infinitely worse. He made odious love to me, boasted of his wealth, said that if I married him I could have the finest diamonds in London, and finally when I would have nothing to do with him he seized me in his arms one day after dinner—he was hideously strong—and swore that he would not let me go until I had kissed him. Mr. Carruthers came in and tore him from me, on which he turned upon his own host, knocking him down and cutting his face open. That was the end of his visit, as you can imagine. Mr. Carruthers apologized to me next day and assured me that I should never be exposed to such an insult again. I have not seen Mr. Woodley since."

"And now, Mr. Holmes, I come at last to the special thing which has caused me to ask your advice today. You must know that every Saturday forenoon I ride on my bicycle to Farnham station in order to get the 12:22 to town. The road from Chiltern Grange is a lonely one, and at one spot it is particularly so, for it lies for over a mile between Charlington Heath, upon one side and the woods which lie round Charlington Hall upon the other. You could not find a more lonely tract of road anywhere, and it is quite rare to meet so much as a cart or a peasant until you reach the highroad near Crooksbury hill. Two weeks ago I was passing this place when I chanced to look back over my shoulder, and about 200 yards behind me I saw a man, also on a bicycle. He seemed to be a middle aged man, with a short, dark beard. I looked back before I reached Farnham, but the man was gone, so I thought no more about it. But you can imagine how surprised I was, Mr. Holmes, when on my return on the Monday I saw the same man on the same stretch of road. My astonishment was increased when the incident occurred again, exactly as before, on the following Saturday and Monday. He always kept his distance and did not molest me in any way, but still it certainly was very odd. I mentioned it to Mr. Carruthers, who seemed interested in what I said and told me that he had ordered a horse and trap, so that in future I should not pass over these lonely roads without some companion."

"The horse and trap were to have come this week, but for some reason they were not delivered, and again I had to cycle to the station. That was this morning. You can think that I looked out when I came to Charlington Heath, and there, sure enough, was the man, exactly as he had been the two weeks before. He always kept so far from me that I could not clearly see his face, but it was certainly some one whom I did not know. He was dressed in a dark suit with a cloth cap. The only thing about his face that I could clearly see was his dark beard."

(To be continued.)

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